



## DEPENDENCY OR COMPLEX INTERDEPENDENCE: AFRICA IN SEARCH OF THEORETICAL EMANCIPATION IN CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL POWER PLAY

By

Okeke, Chinedu<sup>1</sup>, Izu, S. Iroko, Ph.D<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Department of Political Science and International Relations Nile University of Nigeria, Abuja



### Article History

Received: 05- 06- 2026

Accepted: 20- 06- 2026

Published: 26- 06- 2026

Corresponding author

Okeke, Chinedu

Vol – 5 Issue –6

PP: 75-83

### Abstract

*This paper examines whether dependency theory or complex interdependence provides a more convincing explanation of Africa's position in contemporary global power relations. Although Africa has become increasingly integrated into global trade, finance, diplomacy, and institutional networks, this study argues that such integration has not translated into structural autonomy or equitable development. Using a qualitative research design based on documentary analysis of secondary sources, the paper draws on thematic content analysis of foundational theoretical texts, contemporary scholarly literature, and empirical studies on Africa's political economy. The analysis compares the assumptions of dependency theory and complex interdependence and applies them to key dimensions of Africa's global engagement, including trade structure, external finance, South-South cooperation, multipolarity, and knowledge production. The findings show that while contemporary African global engagement exhibits the formal features of interdependence, its substantive outcomes remain shaped by enduring asymmetries in production, capital, technology, and institutional power. Emerging partnerships with non-Western actors diversify Africa's external relations but often reconfigure rather than eliminate dependency. The study further argues that Africa's subordinate position is not only material but also epistemic, as externally generated frameworks continue to shape the interpretation of African realities. The paper concludes that Africa's contemporary condition is best understood as interdependence within dependency, and that dependency theory, especially when extended to include epistemic dimensions, remains the more persuasive framework for explaining Africa's place in the current global order.*

**Keywords:** *Dependency theory, Complex interdependence, Africa, Global political economy; Structural inequality, South-South cooperation, Theoretical emancipation.*

### INTRODUCTION

The theoretical debate around Africa's structural position within the contemporary global order generates contrasting interpretations which present an analytical paradox. In recent times, two main schools of thought have attempted to make sense of the socio-economic trajectory in Africa from different perspectives. Viewed from one perspective, Africa has in recent years become more integrated into global political, economic and institutional networks than at any previous point in history. African states increasingly participate and engage in multilateral organizations, engage in complex trade relationships, and deliberately pursue policies to attract foreign investment (World Bank, 2023; UNCTAD, 2022). Even more, the continent is a significant feature in strategic geopolitical calculations involving both traditional western powers and emerging powers and blocs such as China and BRICS economies (African Development Bank, 2023).

Interpreted from another standpoint however, the expanded integration of the continent has not translated into structural transformation, economic autonomy, or sustained development outcomes. Rather, old patterns of external dependence, uneven exchange and constrained policy space continue to be reinforced in many African economies (Amin, 1976; Chang, 2002). This sharp contradiction bequeaths a fundamental theoretical question: does Africa's contemporary global engagement reflect genuine mutual interdependence as suggested by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (2012), or does it represent a reconfigured form of dependency rooted in historical structural inequalities?

The debate between dependency theory and complex interdependence provides a useful framework for interrogating this question within the context of Africa's International Relations.

Dependency theory, which emerged from and built upon structuralist and Marxist traditions, posits that underdevelopment in the Global South is not a natural condition but the outcome of



historical and ongoing integration into a global capitalist system structured around unequal exchange and surplus extraction from the countries of the Global North. Some foundational and fundamental assertions of the theory elaborate on how colonialism and the international division of labour systematically positioned different regions with colonial experiences such as Africa in subordinate roles within the global economy, thereby shaping long-term development trajectories (Rodney,1972; Frank,1967).

In contrast, the theory of complex interdependence, most prominently advanced by Keohane and Nye, fundamentally assert that contemporary international relations are characterized by multiple channels of interaction, declining reliance on military force, and increasing cooperation through institutions, suggesting a more reciprocal and interconnected global order (Keohane & Nye, 2012). While complex interdependence captures important features of globalization, including the rapid spread of transnational corporations and increased Institutionalized cooperation, its applicability to Africa's evolution and development remain heavily contested. More often than not, the assumption of mutual dependence and benefits embedded within the framework often obscures power asymmetries, unequal production, and the decision-making dynamics that shapes the engagement of African States in the global system. Emerging global developments, such as China-Africa relations, South-South cooperation, and the expansion of multilateral partnerships are frequently presented as evidence of a transition toward a more balanced and multipolar world. However, closer examination of these trends reveal that these engagements sometimes reproduce dependency in modified forms and rarely fundamentally transform the underlying structures that undergirds it. (Enwere et al., 2025; Abdullahi et al., 2024)

This paper attempts to compare the competing perspectives presented above by posing the question: to what extent does dependency or complex interdependence theory provide a more convincing and concrete explanation for Africa's contemporary position in global power relations?

The significance of this scientific inquiry goes beyond winning points or establishing supremacy in a key theoretical debate of our time. Properly conceptualizing Africa's position in the contemporary global system has direct implications for policy, strategy and development pathways in the continent. If Africa's global engagement is interpreted primarily through the lens of complex interdependence, future policy prescriptions may emphasize deeper integration along with increased institutional engagement in the global order. Alternatively, if dependency remains the dominant structural condition, then developmental strategies and policies would be aimed at enhancing autonomy, restructuring production systems and redefining external relationships. Furthermore, this inquiry also intersects with the questions of epistemic autonomy, as some theoretical frameworks/assumptions originate outside the African context and might hence inadequately capture its specific historical and structural realities.

In terms of methodology, the study adopts a qualitative research design based on documentary analysis of secondary sources, including foundational theoretical texts, contemporary scholarly literature, and empirical studies on Africa's political economy and

global engagements. The analytical approach is mainly thematic, focusing on key dimensions such as structural inequality, global integration, sovereignty, and knowledge production

Structurally, the remainder of the paper is arranged as follows. The immediate next section reviews relevant literatures on dependency theory, complex interdependence, and Africa's evolving role in the global system. This is then followed by an empirical review of Africa's engagement in key domains, including trade, finance and South-South cooperation. The paper then outlines its theoretical framework providing the justifications for adopting dependency theory as the primary analytical lens while engaging critically with complex interdependence. Subsequent sections present the findings and discussion, highlighting the persistence of structural constraints despite increasing global integration. The final section of the paper concludes by summarizing the concrete implications of the analysis and offering recommendations for advancing the necessary policy approaches towards greater African autonomy in the contemporary global system.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Origins and Core Propositions of Dependency Theory

Dependency theory emerged in the middle half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a critique of modernization approaches that attributed the cause of underdevelopment in the Global South to internal deficiencies. It posits that underdevelopment is historically produced through integration into a global capitalist system structured around unequal exchange, exploitation and external control. Early formulations of the theory emphasize that regions with historical experiences of domination and colonization such as Africa were incorporated into the global economy in subordinate roles, primarily as exporters of raw materials and importers of finished goods, thereby limiting their capacity for autonomous development (Rodney,1972).

One of the central contributions of Dependency theory is the proposition that development and underdevelopment are not separate processes but are mutually constitutive and reinforce each other. Ander Gunder Frank aptly conceptualizes this relationship as "development of underdevelopment", arguing that the prosperity of core economies is directly linked to the extraction of surplus from peripheral regions (Frank, 1967). This framing is directly at odds with the notion that integration into global markets necessarily leads to convergence in development outcomes. Rather, it suggests that such integration often reinforces structural inequalities.

However, further subsequent scholarship introduced greater nuance into dependency thinking. Cardoso and Faletto posit that dependency does not preclude all forms of development but rather shapes the types and limits of development that can occur within peripheral economies (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979). Their concept of "dependent development" highlights the possibility of growth under conditions of external reliance, particularly where domestic and international actors have aligned interests. Nevertheless, such development remains constrained, uneven and vulnerable to external shocks. This perspective is indeed relevant within the particular context of contemporary Africa, where periods of economic growth have not consistently translated into structural transformation or reduced external vulnerability.



Building on these insights, the world-systems theory extends the analysis of dependency from bilateral relations to a global structural framework. Wallerstein conceptualizes the world economy as a hierarchical system divided into core, semi-periphery, and periphery, characterized by unequal distribution of production, capital and power (Wallerstein, 2004). Within this system, peripheral regions are locked into low-value production and limited bargaining power, while core regions dominate high-value industries and global decision-making processes (Wallerstein, 2004). This structural positioning reinforces long-term patterns of inequality and limits upward mobility for semi-peripheral and especially peripheral nations within the system (Wallerstein, 2004; Frank 1967). Here again, this perspective helps elucidate on the concrete dynamics of African nations as mainly semi-peripheral and peripheral actors within the contemporary global system.

Within the African context, dependency theory has been widely used to explain persistent underdevelopment, weak industrialization, and vulnerability to external economic shocks (Rodney, 1972; Frank 1967). Scholars argue that colonial legacies, continued reliance on primary commodity exports, and external control over finance and technology have entrenched Africa's peripheral status in the global system (Cardoso & Faletto 1979; Wallerstein, 2004) These dynamics are further compounded by contemporary forms of neo-colonialism, including debt dependency, conditional aid, and asymmetrical trade agreements, which reproduce historical patterns of domination in new forms (Nkrumah, 1965; Amin, 1976)

#### **Assumptions and Analytical Perspectives of Complex Interdependence**

In contrast to dependency theory, the theory of complex interdependence gives a more optimistic interpretation of contemporary global relations. Developed by Keohane and Nye, this framework challenges realist assumptions of state-centric and military-dominated interactions. The theory instead emphasizes the growing importance of economic, institutional, and transnational linkages. A fundamental assumption of the theory is that states are connected through multiple channels, including governmental, non-governmental, and transnational actors, and no single issue or area is consistently dominant in the international agenda (Keohane & Nye, 2012).

A key implication of this framework is the notion of mutual dependence. As states become increasingly interconnected, the costs of conflict rise, and cooperation becomes more desirable. As Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye argue, complex interdependence reduces the centrality of military force in interstate relations (Keohane & Nye, 2012). International institutions and regimes play a central role in facilitating cooperation by reducing uncertainty and providing information (Keohane, 1984). This perspective aligns closely with broader narratives of globalization, which emphasise increasing economic integration, technological connectivity, and the diffusion of power across multiple actors (Held et al., 1999).

However, critics argue that complex interdependence tends to understate power asymmetries and uneven influence within these networks. While the framework acknowledges that

interdependence can be asymmetric, it does not sufficiently account for how such asymmetries shape outcomes, particularly in relationships between developed and developing regions. Scholars such as Susan Strange emphasise the role of structural power in shaping global economic relations (Strange, 1988) while Ha-Joon Chang highlights how global integration can constrain the policy autonomy of developing economies (Chang, 2002). In the African context, where structural inequalities in trade, finance, and technology remain pronounced, this critique aligns with dependency-oriented perspectives, which argue that integration into the global economy often reproduces rather than reduces inequality (Amin, 1976).

#### **Africa in the Contemporary Global Political Economy**

Recent scholarship on Africa's role and position in the global system reflects a growing interest in the implications of globalization, multipolarity and South-South cooperation. The rise of emerging powers, particularly China, has been interpreted by some scholars as an opportunity for African countries to diversify partnerships and reduce dependence on traditional Western actors (Brautigam, 2009). Similarly, initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) are often presented as pathways toward greater regional integration and economic transformation within the continent (UNCTAD, 2021).

Studies on South-South cooperation emphasize its potential to foster more equitable and mutually beneficial relationships, grounded in shared development experiences and collective bargaining power. For instance, soft power diplomacy within the Global South is increasingly framed as a mechanism for promoting horizontal partnerships that challenge traditional North-South hierarchies (Enwere et al., 2025). Likewise, analyses of BRICS engagement in Africa highlight its role in supporting infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and regional integration (Abdullahi et al., 2024).

Despite these developments, a growing body of literature cautions against overly optimistic interpretations. Critics argue that new forms of engagement may replicate existing patterns of dependency, particularly where African economies remain reliant on external financing, technology, and markets (Amin, 1976; Moyo, 2009). The persistence of primary commodity exports, limited industrial diversification, and vulnerability to global market fluctuations are concrete proofs which suggests that structural constraints have not been fundamentally altered.

Furthermore, the contemporary elements of globalization have introduced new dimensions of dependency in Africa's international relations. For instance, financial globalization exposes African economies to volatile capital flows and external shocks, while digital technologies raise concerns about data sovereignty and technological dependence. Rodrik argues that globalization often constrains domestic policy space, creating tensions between economic integration, national sovereignty, and democratic accountability (Rodrik, 2011). This "globalization paradox" is particularly salient to understand, especially for African states seeking to balance integration with development objectives.

In addition, the role of foreign aid remains a contested issue. Moyo argues that long-term reliance on aid can undermine domestic



institutions, distort incentives, and perpetuate dependency rather than promote sustainable development (Moyo, 2009). While this perspective is widely contested, it reinforces broader concerns about the structural implications of external dependence in Africa's development trajectory.

### **Epistemic Dependency and the Question of Theoretical Emancipation**

Beyond material dimensions, recent scholarship has increasingly highlighted the importance of epistemic dependency in shaping Africa's position within the global system. Epistemic dependency refers to the dominance of external frameworks, methodologies, and knowledge systems in interpreting and explaining African realities (Hountondji, 1996; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Nkansah et al., 2024). This raises critical questions about whose knowledge counts, whose perspectives are prioritized, and how theoretical frameworks influence policy and practice (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986).

Studies on international research collaboration reveal that African institutions often occupy subordinate positions within global knowledge networks, with limited control over research agendas, funding, and dissemination (UNESCO, 2021). This dynamic mirrors broader patterns of economic dependency, suggesting that Africa's marginalization extends beyond material structures to include intellectual and epistemological domains (Nkansah et al., 2024).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is grounded in a comparative theoretical framework that draws on dependency theory, world-systems analysis, and complex interdependence, with dependency theory adopted as the primary analytical lens. The purpose of this section is to define these frameworks clearly, establish their core assumptions, and justify their relevance for explaining Africa's position in contemporary global power relations.

### **Dependency Theory**

Dependency theory provides the central foundation for this study. At its core, the theory posits that the global economic system is structured in a way that systematically advantages developed (core) countries while constraining the development prospects of developing (peripheral) regions (Frank, 1967; Wallerstein, 2004). Underdevelopment is therefore not an original or natural condition but the result of historical and ongoing processes of exploitation, unequal exchange, and external domination (Rodney, 1972).

Rodney's historical analysis is particularly instructive in this regard. He argues that Africa's underdevelopment is directly linked to its incorporation into the global capitalist system through slavery, colonialism, and the extraction of surplus for the benefit of European economies (Rodney, 1972). This perspective shifts the analytical focus away from internal deficiencies and toward the structural dynamics of the global system.

Frank extends this argument by emphasizing the relational nature of development and underdevelopment. His concept of the "development of underdevelopment" highlights how economic growth in core regions is intrinsically tied to the extraction of resources and value from peripheral regions (Frank, 1967). In this

framework, the integration of peripheral economies into global markets does not lead to convergence but rather reinforces structural inequality.

Cardoso and Faletto introduce an important refinement by acknowledging the possibility of development within conditions of dependency. Their notion of "dependent development" suggests that economic growth can occur in peripheral economies, but such growth remains constrained, externally oriented, and vulnerable to shifts in the global system (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979). This insight is particularly relevant for contemporary Africa, where periods of economic expansion have not consistently translated into structural transformation or sustained autonomy.

Collectively, these perspectives provide a framework for understanding Africa's position as one shaped by historical incorporation into an unequal global system, continued reliance on external markets and capital, and limited control over the terms of engagement (Frank, 1967; Rodney 1972; Cardoso & Faletto, 1979). Dependency theory thus offers a structural explanation for the persistence of inequality despite increasing global integration.

### **World-Systems Analysis as an Extension of Dependency**

While dependency theory traditionally focuses on relationships between developed and developing countries, world-systems analysis expands this perspective to a global scale. Wallerstein conceptualizes the world economy as a single capitalist system characterized by a hierarchical division of labour among core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral regions (Wallerstein, 2004).

In this framework, the core regions dominate high-value production and control key aspects of global finance, technology, and governance, while peripheral regions specialize in low-value activities and remain dependent on external demand. Semi-peripheral regions occupy an intermediate position, exhibiting characteristics of both core and periphery (Wallerstein, 2004).

For Africa, world-systems analysis reinforces the argument that its position within the global economy is not neutral but structurally determined. Despite different degrees of variations across countries, the continent largely occupies a peripheral position characterized by limited industrial capacity, dependence on primary exports, and vulnerability to external shocks (Wallerstein, 2004; UNCTAD, 2019). This structural positioning constrains the ability of African states to achieve autonomous development and shapes the outcomes of their interactions within the global system.

World-systems analysis also highlights the persistence of global inequality in International economic relations over time, suggesting that mobility within the system is limited and often requires significant structural transformation (Wallerstein, 2004). This insight complements dependency theory by situating Africa's experience within a broader global context and emphasizing the systemic nature of inequality.

### **Complex Interdependence**

The theory of complex interdependence offers an alternative perspective on global relations, emphasizing the increasing interconnectedness of states and the growing importance of cooperation. Keohane and Nye argue that contemporary international relations are characterized by multiple channels of



interaction, including not only state-to-state relations but also transnational and non-state actors. In such a system, military force becomes less central in certain issue areas, and economic and institutional linkages play a more prominent role (Keohane & Nye, 2012).

A key feature of complex interdependence is the concept of mutual dependence. As states become more interconnected, they are increasingly affected by each other's actions, creating incentives for cooperation and coordination. International institutions and regimes facilitate this process by providing mechanisms for negotiation, reducing uncertainty, and promoting stability (Keohane & Nye, 2012; Keohane, 1984).

This framework is particularly useful for understanding the nature of contemporary globalization, including the expansion of trade networks, financial flows, and diplomatic engagements (Keohane & Nye, 2012). In the African context, it helps explain the growing participation of African states in multilateral organizations, regional integration initiatives, and global governance structures.

However, while complex interdependence acknowledges that increasing interconnectedness can be asymmetric, it does not fully account for the structural implications of such asymmetries. The assumption of mutual dependence and benefits often times obscures significant disparities in power, resources, and influence, particularly in relationships involving African countries and other developed regions (Strange, 1988).

#### Analytical Position of the Study

This study adopts a synthesized position that recognizes the coexistence of interdependence and dependency but emphasizes the latter as the dominant structural condition in Africa's International relations. In this framing, interdependence represents the form of contemporary global interactions, while dependency reflects their underlying structure and outcomes (Keohane & Nye, 2012; Frank, 1967).

Africa's increasing integration into global networks is therefore not interpreted as evidence of equal participation but as a manifestation of deeper structural relationships that continue to constrain autonomy and development. The concept of theoretical emancipation is introduced within this framework to emphasize the need for African-centred approaches that critically engage with, rather than simply adopt, dominant global theories (Hountondji, 1996; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

By combining insights from dependency theory, world-systems analysis, and complex interdependence, the study provides a comprehensive framework for analysing Africa's position in contemporary global power-play, while maintaining a clear theoretical orientation toward structural inequality and its implications.

## METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

### Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design which is useful for examining theoretical debates and interpreting patterns within complex socio-political and economic systems (Creswell, 2014).

The focus of the paper is not to test any form of quantitative hypothesis but to critically evaluate competing theoretical frameworks—dependency theory and complex interdependence—and assess their explanatory relevance to Africa's contemporary position in global power relations. A qualitative approach therefore is more suited for in-depth conceptual analysis and contextual interpretation of both theoretical and empirical materials.

### Method of Data Collection

The data used for this study were derived from secondary sources, collected through documentary research method. The sources include:

- Foundational theoretical texts on dependency theory and global political economy, such as Walter Rodney's analysis of historical underdevelopment and Andre Gunder Frank's critique of development paradigms (Rodney, 1972; Frank, 1967)
- Structural and system-level analyses, including world-systems theory as developed by Immanuel Wallerstein (Wallerstein, 2004)
- Contemporary critiques of globalization and development policy, particularly those examining the limits of integration and external finance (Rodrik, 2011; Moyo, 2009)
- Scholarly journal articles and policy-oriented studies on Africa's engagement with global actors, including South-South cooperation, BRICS partnerships, and evolving geopolitical dynamics (Enwere et al., 2025; Abdullahi et al., 2024)

These materials were selected based on their relevance to the research question, their contribution to theoretical debates, and their empirical insights into Africa's contemporary global interactions. Emphasis was placed on peer-reviewed academic sources and widely cited scholarly works to ensure the credibility and academic rigor of the study.

### Method of Data Analysis

The study employs a thematic content analysis approach to examine and synthesize the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involves identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring themes across the literature and empirical studies used. The analysis is structured around key conceptual categories derived from the research objectives, including:

- Structural inequality and unequal exchange
- Global integration and interdependence
- Economic sovereignty and policy autonomy
- External dependency in trade, finance, and technology
- Epistemic dependency and knowledge production

Each source is analyzed in relation to these themes, allowing for a systematic comparison of theoretical perspectives and empirical findings. This approach enables the study to move beyond descriptive summaries and develop a coherent analytical narrative that connects theory with observed realities. The analytical approach is interpretive, focusing on uncovering patterns, tensions, and relationships between theoretical frameworks and empirical realities.



## DISCUSSION

### Interdependence in Form: Expanding Global Linkages for Africa

When observed at the descriptive level, Africa's engagement with the global system reflects many characteristics associated with complex interdependence. The continent is increasingly connected through multiple channels, including trade, finance, diplomacy, security cooperation, and transnational networks (UNCTAD, 2022; World Bank, 2023). The rise of emerging global actors, such as China and Russia, alongside initiatives like BRICS and South–South cooperation, further reinforces the perception of a more diversified and networked global order (AFDB, 2023; Abdullahi et al., 2024).

Recent developments in Africa's geopolitical landscape illustrate this trend clearly. Russia's renewed engagement across the continent, for instance, involves diplomatic expansion, military cooperation, and economic investments spanning multiple sectors, including mining, energy, and security partnerships (Ousmane & Enwere, 2025). Similarly, BRICS-related engagements and soft power diplomacy frameworks emphasize mutual cooperation, infrastructure development, and alternative financing mechanisms as pathways toward reducing reliance on traditional Western institutions (Enwere et al., 2025; Abdullahi et al., 2024)

These developments could be interpreted as evidence of increasing reciprocity and mutual benefit. Indeed, African states are no longer exclusively tied to a single bloc but instead operate within a more pluralistic international environment (AFDB, 2023). China's huge financial packages offered for infrastructural projects and Russia's security expertise and hardware as represented by the Wagner group are alternative concrete options open for African countries to pursue partnerships in different sectors (UNCTAD, 2022; SIPRI, 2023). This diversification of partnerships suggests greater agency and strategic flexibility, aligning with the notion that power in international relations is becoming more diffuse and less hierarchical (Keohane & Nye, 2012).

However, while these developments support the validity of interdependence, they do not necessarily confirm its underlying assumption of mutuality. The existence of multiple and newly diversified channels of interaction and engagements does not automatically imply equality within those relationships. While these newly available options in the Global order might give African states the options to pursue development with relatively greater bargaining leeway than in the previous decades, the central issue lies in how these interactions are structured and who ultimately benefits from them. And as it regards the structuring of these relationships, African countries receive lesser benefits and have a more supplicant relationship in relation to more developed regions of the world. Empirical evidence suggests that the gains from such engagements remain unevenly distributed, with African countries often occupying weaker positions within global value chains and financial arrangements (UNCTAD, 2022; World Bank, 2023). As a result, these relationships continue to reflect disparate patterns in which African states derive comparatively limited benefits relative to more advanced economies.

### Inequality in Africa's Global Engagements

A closer examination of Africa's global engagements reveals that structural inequalities continue to shape outcomes across key domains. Despite increased connectivity, African economies remain disproportionately dependent on external actors for capital, technology, markets, and institutional frameworks (UNCTAD, 2024; African Development Bank, 2024; World Bank, 2024). This aligns more closely with the core propositions of dependency theory.

Trade patterns provide a clear example. As discussed earlier, Africa's continued reliance on primary commodity exports and importation of manufactured goods reflects a structural position within the global economy that limits value addition and industrialization. This pattern is not merely historical but actively reproduced through contemporary global market dynamics (Rodney, 1972; Frank, 1967).

Financial dependency further reinforces this structure. The reliance on external financing, including debt, foreign investment, and development assistance, constrains policy autonomy and exposes African economies to external shocks. Neoliberal economic reforms, implemented through structural adjustment programs, have deepened this dependency by prioritizing market liberalization, privatization, and reduced state intervention. While these policies have facilitated integration into the global economy, they have also contributed to inequality, weakened public institutions, and limited sustainable development outcomes (Gelman & Kilmicka, 2026).

The Kenyan case offers a particularly vivid illustration of these dynamics. Despite being positioned as a regional economic hub, Kenya's development trajectory has been shaped by external pressures, including IMF-imposed reforms, debt dependency, and the dominance of global capital. The result is a paradox of economic growth alongside deepening inequality, reduced public services, and mass social unrest especially in recent times (Mwangi, 2024). This contradiction reflects a broader pattern in the continent whereby the integration of African states into global markets does not necessarily translate into equitable development within the countries undergoing such integration.

These empirical patterns support the argument that interdependence, while evident, is unevenly distributed in the African context. African states are often more dependent on external actors than those actors are on Africa and this situation significantly undermines the reciprocity assumed within complex interdependence theory.

### Multipolarity and the Reconfiguration of Dependency

One of the most significant developments in contemporary global politics is the shift toward a more multipolar order. The growing presence of non-Western actors in Africa, including Russia, China, and other emerging economies, has been widely interpreted as an opportunity to reduce dependency on traditional Western powers (German Institute for Development and Sustainability, 2025; Austrian Institute for International Affairs, 2025).

However, the evidence suggests that multipolarity may represent a reconfiguration rather than a transformation of dependency. Russia's involvement in Africa, for example, is often framed as an



alternative to Western dominance, emphasizing anti-colonial rhetoric and non-interference. Yet empirical analysis indicates that its engagement is driven by strategic geopolitical and economic interests, including access to natural resources, expansion of influence, and global power projection (Ousmane & Enwere, 2025).

In some cases, these engagements replicate classical dependency dynamics. Resource-for-security arrangements, mining concessions, and military cooperation agreements can create new forms of external control, even as they reduce reliance on traditional partners (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2023). Similarly, infrastructure investments and trade agreements with emerging powers often maintain Africa's role as a supplier of raw materials and dumping ground for finished goods rather than facilitating structural transformation (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2022; African Development Bank, 2024).

This pattern extends beyond growing Russian and Chinese influence in Africa. South-South cooperation more broadly, while offering new opportunities, does not inherently eliminate asymmetries. Differences in economic capacity, technological advancement, and bargaining power within the Global South can reproduce hierarchical relationships under new configurations (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2022; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023). Thus, while the emerging multipolarity challenges the dominance of a single hegemonic power in the African continent, it does not automatically lead to greater equality in global relations (African Development Bank, 2024).

#### Theoretical Emancipation and African Agency

While the persistence of dependency is evident, it is important to avoid portraying Africa as entirely passive. African states and actors exercise some form of agency within the constraints of the global system, seeking to navigate and, in some cases, reshape their position (African Development Bank, 2024; United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2023).

However, meaningful agency requires a clear understanding of the structural conditions within which it operates. This is where the concept of theoretical emancipation becomes critical. The reliance on externally generated frameworks, whether modernization theory or liberal interdependence, can limit the ability to fully grasp the specificities of Africa's experience (Hountondji, 1996; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

Recent events in Kenya provides insight into this dimension. The persistence of neoliberal policies, despite their mixed outcomes, reflects not only external pressure but also the uncritical adoption of global economic paradigms of complex interdependence by domestic elites (Mwangi, 2024). This highlights the intersection between material and epistemic dependency, where external ideas shape internal policy choices.

The pursuit of theoretical emancipation therefore involves not only challenging structural inequalities but also developing context-sensitive frameworks that reflect Africa's historical and contemporary realities. This does not imply rejecting all external theories but rather engaging with them critically and selectively.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine whether dependency theory or complex interdependence offers a more convincing explanation of Africa's position in contemporary global power relations. The findings so far have shown that while the expansion of global linkages across trade, finance, diplomacy, and security reflects key features of complex interdependence, these interactions are not structured on equal or reciprocal terms. Instead, they are embedded within enduring patterns of asymmetry that align more closely with the core propositions of dependency theory.

The evidence demonstrates that Africa's integration into the global system has intensified over time, but this integration has not fundamentally altered its structural position. Trade remains characterized by the export of primary commodities and the import of higher value-added goods, reinforcing unequal exchange (Rodney, 1972; Frank, 1967). Financial engagement, including debt and external investment, continues to constrain policy autonomy and expose African economies to external vulnerabilities, particularly within the context of neoliberal reforms that prioritize market liberalization over structural transformation (Rodrik, 2011; Gelman & Kilmicka, 2026). Even emerging forms of partnership, such as South-South cooperation and engagements with actors like Russia, while diversifying Africa's global connections, often reproduce similar patterns of resource extraction and geopolitical competition (Ousmane & Enwere, 2025).

These findings suggest that complex interdependence, although useful in describing the increasing density and multiplicity of global interactions, is limited in its explanatory capacity when applied to the African context. Again, the dominance of externally generated theoretical frameworks and policy paradigms influences how Africa's challenges are understood and addressed, often reinforcing existing power relations. This highlights the need for theoretical emancipation in form of context-sensitive frameworks that critically engage with global theories while reflecting Africa's specific realities.

Overall, the study concludes that Africa's contemporary global engagement is best understood as a condition of interdependence within dependency. While the continent is deeply integrated into global systems, this integration operates within structural constraints that limit the realization of equitable and autonomous development.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis demonstrates that Africa's increasing integration into the global system has not translated into structural autonomy, largely due to enduring patterns of dependency embedded within trade, finance, governance, and knowledge systems. The following recommendations are therefore directed at addressing both the material and epistemic dimensions of this dependency:

- African states should promote a structural transformational shift away from primary commodity dependence by prioritizing industrialization, value added manufacturing, and technological upgrading to eliminate the situation of unequal exchange and gain concrete leverage in the increasingly interconnected global economy.



- There should also be targeted measures designed to strengthen economic sovereignty and expand the policy space in the continent. This should be done through careful managed engagement with external creditors and global financial institutions which guarantees safeguards against external shocks and conditionalities.
- African states should strategically reframe the nature of south-south cooperation by ensuring that partnerships with emerging powers focus on technology transfer, local capacity development, and fair contractual terms.
- Investment in Autonomous African knowledge systems should be prioritized across the continent. This should be pursued by strengthening African-led knowledge production and developing context-specific theoretical frameworks to reduce reliance on externally imposed paradigms.
- Finally, there is the crucial need consolidate Regional Integration and deepen intra-African cooperation (e.g., AfCFTA). Approaching the International economic system through integrated regional economic communities like ECOWAS, SADC, COMESA, EAC etc has the potential of boosting trade coordination, and collective bargaining power of the continent in the global system.

## REFERENCES

1. Abdullahi, A., Ibrahim, A. S., & Chembayil, S. (2024). South Africa as a gateway to Africa: BRICS cooperation and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). *Review of History and Political Science*, 11, 68–79. <https://doi.org/10.15640/rhps.v11a8>
2. African Development Bank. (2023). *African economic outlook 2023*. <https://www.afdb.org/en/documents>
3. African Development Bank. (2024). *African economic outlook 2024*. <https://www.afdb.org/en/documents>
4. Amin, S. (1976). *Unequal development: An essay on the social formations of peripheral capitalism*. Monthly Review Press.
5. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
6. Brautigam, D. (2009). *The dragon's gift: The real story of China in Africa*. Oxford University Press.
7. Cardoso, F. H., & Faletto, E. (1979). *Dependency and development in Latin America*. University of California Press. <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520035271/dependency-and-development-in-latin-america>
8. Chang, H.-J. (2002). *Kicking away the ladder: Development strategy in historical perspective*. Anthem Press.
9. Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.
10. Enwere, C., Olabode, O., & Abdullahi, A. (2025). The dynamics of soft power diplomacy in the Global South: A new development initiative for developing countries of the South. *Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Science*, 2(2), 351–362. <https://doi.org/10.69739/jahss.v2i2.598>
11. Frank, A. G. (1967). *Capitalism and underdevelopment in Latin America*. Monthly Review Press. [https://monthlyreview.org/product/capitalism\\_and\\_underdevelopment\\_in\\_latin\\_america/](https://monthlyreview.org/product/capitalism_and_underdevelopment_in_latin_america/)
12. Held, D., McGrew, A., Goldblatt, D., & Perraton, J. (1999). *Global transformations: Politics, economics and culture*. Stanford University Press.
13. Hountondji, P. J. (1996). *African philosophy: Myth and reality* (2nd ed.). Indiana University Press. <https://iupress.org/9780253212093>
14. International Crisis Group. (2023). *Africa report on Russia's role and Wagner Group*. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/>
15. International Monetary Fund. (2020). *Regional economic outlook: Sub-Saharan Africa*. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO>
16. Keohane, R. O. (1984). *After hegemony: Cooperation and discord in the world political economy*. Princeton University Press. <https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691075054>
17. Keohane, R. O., & Nye, J. S. (2012). *Power and interdependence* (4th ed.). Longman.
18. Moyo, D. (2009). *Dead aid: Why aid is not working and how there is a better way for Africa*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. <https://us.macmillan.com/books/9780374139568>
19. Mwangi, N. (2024). Kenya is not in crisis – Kenya is the crisis. *Interventions: Contemporary Left Issues in Africa*, Issue 06.
20. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2013). *Coloniality of power in postcolonial Africa: Myths of decolonization*. CODESRIA.
21. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. (1986). *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. Heinemann.
22. Nkansah, J. O., Oldac, Y. I., & Yang, L. (2024). Dependency and neocolonialism in international research collaboration: Evidence from a Ghanaian elite university. *Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01393-w>
23. Nkrumah, K. (1965). *Neo-colonialism: The last stage of imperialism*. Thomas Nelson.
24. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2023). *Global development report*. <https://www.oecd.org/>
25. Ousmane, B., & Enwere, C. (2025). Ally or neocolonialist? Russia's involvement in Africa 2.0. *Journal of Xi'an Shiyong University, Natural Science Edition*, 21(10), 89–121.
26. Reinhart, C. M., & Rogoff, K. S. (2010). *This time is different: Eight centuries of financial folly*. Princeton University Press.



27. Rodney, W. (1972). *How Europe underdeveloped Africa*. Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications. <https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/rodney-walter/how-europe/>
28. Rodrik, D. (2011). *The globalization paradox: Democracy and the future of the world economy*. W. W. Norton. <https://wwnorton.com/books/9780393341288>
29. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. (2023). *Trends in international arms transfers, 2023*. <https://www.sipri.org/>
30. Strange, S. (1988). *States and markets*. Pinter.
31. Stiglitz, J. E. (2002). *Globalization and its discontents*. W. W. Norton. <https://wwnorton.com/books/9780393051248>
32. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2010). *Economic development in Africa report*. <https://unctad.org/topic/africa>
33. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2019). *Economic development in Africa report*. <https://unctad.org/topic/africa>
34. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2021). *Economic development in Africa report*. <https://unctad.org/topic/africa>
35. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2022). *Economic development in Africa report 2022*. United Nations. <https://unctad.org/topic/africa>
36. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2024). *Economic development in Africa report 2024*. United Nations. <https://unctad.org/topic/africa>
37. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2021). *UNESCO science report*. <https://www.unesco.org/>
38. United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. (2023). *Economic report on Africa*. United Nations. <https://www.uneca.org/>
39. Wallerstein, I. (2004). *World-systems analysis: An introduction*. Duke University Press. <https://www.dukeupress.edu/world-systems-analysis>
40. World Bank. (2020). *World development indicators*. <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>
41. World Bank. (2023). *Africa's pulse*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/africas-pulse>
42. World Bank. (2024). *Africa's pulse*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/africas-pulse>